

# Cristina Garcia

*Critics' remarks about her major publications*

- 1992 **Dreaming in Cuban**, has been called “dazzling... remarkable” – New York Times, “An intricate weaving of dramatic events with the supernatural and the cosmic... Evocative and lush...A rich and haunting narrative, an excellent new voice in contemporary fiction.” –San Francisco Chronicle, “Impressive... Her story is about three generations of Cuban women and their separate responses to the revolution. Her special feat is to tell it in a style as warm and gentle as the ‘sustaining aromas of vanilla and almond’, as rhythmic as the music of Beny Moré.” – Time
- 1997 **The Aguero Sisters**, was hailed as “Exhilarating... Garcia is a strikingly deft and supple writer.” – The New York Times Book Review  
“Haunting...Powerfully imagined” – The New York Times  
“Something fresh, rare, and wonderful... Garcia contrasts not only the two sisters, but also their cultures.” – The Boston Sunday Globe  
This novel tells the stories of Reina and Constanica Aguero, Cuban sisters who have been estranged for 30 years. Reina – tall and darkly beautiful – still lives in her homeland, earning her living as an expert electrician. The pale and petite Constanica lives in the United States, a beauty expert seeing miracles and portents wherever she looks. She becomes haunted by the memory of her parents and the unexplained death of their mother.
- 2003 **Monkey Hunting**, received high praise as “a richly patterned mini-epic, a moving chorus of distinct voices” – Publishers Weekly, “Pristinely lyrical and enchanting prose...powerfully alluring characters...(in a) gorgeously detailed and entrancingly told...bittersweet saga of a family of remarkable individuals spanning a century of displacement, war, and sacrifice, and a world of forbearance and love.” – Booklist This is a many-faceted tale about an extended Chinese-Cuban family, beginning in 1857 when Chen Pan is tricked into indentured servitude and shipped to Cuba where he is sold as a slave. He escapes and becomes a successful Havana businessman who liberates a mulatto slave and her infant son. Garcia traces patterns in the lives of four generations of Chen Pan’s family, including relatives back in China, in New York City, and in war-torn Vietnam of the 1960s.
- 2003 **¡Cubanismo! : The Vintage Book of Contemporary Cuban Literature**, edited by C. Garcia - An anthology that brings together the vibrant worlds of Cuban music and literature. It has been called, “an exhilarating jam session, a celebration of Cuba that will reverberate for its readers long after it is read”.

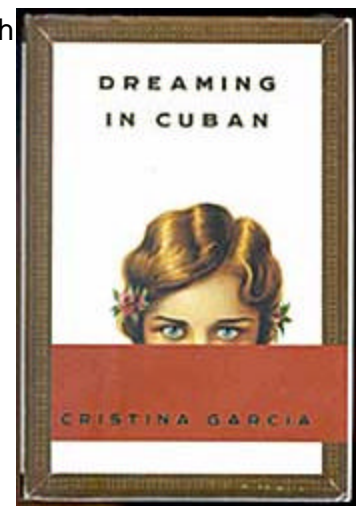


## ABOUT CRISTINA GARCIA

Cristina Garcia has been hailed as one of the most important Cuban American voices in U. S. literature. Garcia was born July 4, 1958 in Havana, Cuba, but moved to New York City with her parents in 1961 after Fidel Castro came to power. She grew up in Queens, Brooklyn Heights, and Manhattan. After a largely Catholic education, she completed in 1979 a Bachelor's degree in Political Science at Barnard College. She credits her only English course at Barnard with awakening a strong love of literature (Kevane and Heredia 71), which continued to grow throughout the course of her graduate work. She graduated from Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in 1981 with a Master's degree in International Relations. During her graduate studies, she spent a year in Italy and planned to join the Foreign Service after graduation. Instead, she returned to Europe for her first job, a marketing position with Proctor and Gamble in West Germany, which she held for three months

Upon her return to the United States, she turned to a career in journalism. While at Johns Hopkins, Garcia had held a part-time job as a "copy girl" at **The New York Times**, where she was introduced to the world of reporting. Remembering her work there, Garcia interned at **The Boston Globe** for a short period of time and then took a job as a reporter for the **Knoxville Journal** in Tennessee. In 1983, she accepted a job with **Time Magazine** in New York, for whom she subsequently worked in San Francisco, Miami, and Los Angeles. In 1990, she left **Time** to write fiction full-time.

In 1992, Garcia gave birth to her daughter, Pilar. She speaks Spanish to her daughter, believing in the importance of tradition. Although she did not grow up as part of a Latino/a or Cuban community, she says has "always thought of myself as Cuban" (Lupez 104). Garcia grew up speaking Spanish at home and listening to family stories about Cuba, both of which gave her a strong sense of pride in her country of origin. She says that she sometimes has an uncomfortable relationship with Cubans, both on the island and in Miami because she has generally not engaged in anti-Castro activism. She believes strongly that "there is no one Cuban exile" (Kevane and Heredia 75), a theme which she seeks to emphasize in each of her novels as well as in her own life.



Garcia published **Dreaming in Cuban**, which was nominated for the National Book Award, in 1992, followed by **The Aguero Sisters** in 1997 and **Monkey Hunting** in 2003. She has been a Guggenheim Fellow, a Hodder Fellow at Princeton University, and is the recipient of the Whiting Writers Award.



*A Conversation with*

CRISTINA GARCIA

*author of*

Monkey Hunting

**Q:** Much of our current knowledge of Cuba is second-hand, fueled by books and film. Your 1992 novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, introduced the Cuban-American experience to many American readers, arriving on bookshelves well in advance of popular films like *The Buena Vista Social Club* or *Before Night Falls*. How do you make the Cuban and Cuban-American experience ring true for American readers?

**A:** I try to stick to the particularities of my characters' situations and obsessions. There is no such thing as a Cuban 'type,' only individuals who reflect in their subjective ways, the greater political and social realities of their identity.

**Q:** *Monkey Hunting* begins in territory unfamiliar to your previous novels--19th Century agrarian China--with the story of Chen Pan. How did his story come to you? Was there a significant wave of Chinese emigration to Cuba?

**A:** The story of the Chinese in Cuba is long and varied, beginning in 1847 when the first ships of contract laborers arrived to work the island's sugarcane fields. Over the years, many waves of Chinese followed, nestling themselves into every town and village in Cuba. I first became interested in their story as a kid, when I was taken to eat at Chinese-Cuban restaurants in Manhattan.

**Q:** Your novel explores the notion of opportunity. Chen Pan's departure from the failing family farm for Cuba--where he believes the streets are paved with gold and the harvest never fails--ends in his enslavement. But his subsequent resolve creates a whole new array of opportunities that power his family history forward. In what sense is his story typical?

**A:** I would say Chen Pan's story is atypical. Most of the Chinese who had the misfortune to arrive in Cuba as he did ended up dead or destitute. Still, there were a few who managed to secure their freedom by hook or by crook and helped establish Havana's thriving China town.

**Q: You've written previously of the challenge of living between two worlds. The multi-generational stories in *Monkey Hunting* move through time and geography from country to country. Is family the common thread that connects all these different places and times?**

A: The power of family cannot be underestimated, fictionally or otherwise. I think we receive many inheritances that we're not even aware of—not just our grandfather's nose or an aunt's predilection for the flute, but other emotional inheritances that we play out in our own ways and contexts.

**Q: How central is the notion of family to the Cuban-American identity?**

A: Family, music, and black beans. This is the holy trinity of Cuban identity.

**Q: Was it difficult to write about a magical and timeless sense of place when it must contrast with the brash political landscape of Castro's revolution, Mao's China, the stark reality of an immigrant New York experience, or that of a patriotic new American soldier's encounter with wartime Vietnam?**

A: It was both a liberation and burden to write about a place and time so far removed from my own. I immersed myself in the history of colonial Cuba to get the atmosphere and details right, but after a certain point I put all the books away and simply tried to tell a good story.

**Q: What is the connection between Chen Pan's emigration from China and the Cuban Diaspora two generations later? Which generation is marked in particular by an eagerness to assimilate?**

A: Chen Pan chose to leave China to seek a better life in Cuba, even though he ended up enslaved for a time. Those who left Cuba two generations later were motivated for largely political reasons. This is why so many Cuban-Americans refer to themselves as exiles, as opposed to immigrants. It's a big difference and it sets them apart from other ethnic groups in the United States.

**Q: You were born in Havana and raised in the United States. How does your experience inform your characters?**

A: I think my obsessions inform my characters more than my actual experiences. As such, I'm a part of all of them—even the 19th century Chinese farm laborer-cum-antiques shop owner.

**Q: In addition to penning *Monkey Hunting*, you've also edited and written an introduction to ¡Cubanísimo! a new anthology of contemporary Cuban literature to be published in May. Tell me more...**

A: ¡Cubanísimo! is a labor of literary love, a song to the contemporary music and literature of the island. I never had so much fun in my life!